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## LANGUAGE TEACHERS AS NATURAL RESEARCHERS OF THEIR PRACTICE AND POTENTIAL AGENTS OF CHANGE

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### Abstract

Teachers reflect on their practice on a daily basis in a quite informal and instinctive way. With encouragement, time and the opportunity to make their reflection more systematic, teachers can become teacher researchers and be well placed to give insightful and valid accounts of pedagogical processes and practices in their classrooms. Such research is valuable professional development for teachers. Furthermore, research empowers teachers in having a voice in classroom-focused research and making a contribution to knowledge from an insider position.

I have taken four 'telling cases', two teachers in Spain researching aspects of their practice in their classrooms where they teach English as a foreign language amongst other subjects, and two teachers in England teaching Spanish as a foreign language. Each teacher carried out a small research project within the context of a Masters' programme. I analyse their narratives in terms of the teachers' 'felt need' to research, their research questions, their methodologies, their research findings and impact of their practice. I frame this analysis with reference to the extent of the transformation of the teachers' mind sets and their practices when they had completed their research. I conclude that teacher research, which could be part of school professional development, offers rich personal learning, creates professional identity and enables teachers to develop self- agency to question and change practices to improve student learning.

**Key words:** teacher research; critical reflexivity; student voice; empowerment; transformation; professional identity.

### Resumen

Los docentes suelen reflexionar sobre su práctica diaria de manera bastante informal e intuitiva. Con el estímulo, el tiempo y la oportunidad de convertir su reflexión en algo más sistemático, el docente puede convertirse en docente-investigador y estar en disposición de ofrecer datos interesantes y válidos a cerca de los procesos y la práctica pedagógica en su aula. Se trata de un desarrollo profesional valioso para el profesorado. Además, la investigación ayuda al docente a tener voz en la investigación centrada en el aula, aportando su contribución al conocimiento desde una posición privilegiada.

Son cuatro los docentes que reflexionan en voz alta sobre su investigación: En España, dos profesores que indagan sobre su práctica en el aula donde, entre otras asignaturas, imparten inglés como lengua extranjera, y otros dos profesores que enseñan español como lengua extranjera en Inglaterra. Cada docente lleva a cabo un pequeño proyecto de investigación en el contexto de un programa de máster. Se analizan aquí sus "narrativas" en relación con lo que el docente siente que debe ser investigado, sus preguntas de investigación, su metodología, los resultados de la investigación y el impacto de ésta en su práctica. El análisis describe la hasta qué punto cambia el modo de pensar del docente en relación a su práctica, una vez realizada la investigación, y concluye afirmando que la investigación docente, que podría ser parte del desarrollo profesional de la escuela, ofrece al docente un gran aprendizaje personal además de una identidad profesional y le capacita para modificar su práctica docente con el fin de mejorar el aprendizaje de sus estudiantes.

**Palabras clave:** docente investigador; reflexión crítica; voz del alumnado; empoderamiento; transformación; identidad profesional.

## 1. Introduction: towards the concept of teachers as teacher researchers

With the trend towards evidence-based practice, and in an era of accountability, teachers are increasingly called to give valid accounts of ‘what works’ and ‘in what conditions’ in their classrooms. Teachers are no strangers to data, being generators, collectors and receivers of substantial amounts of data in their daily practices. Indeed, Brighouse and Woods assert that: *‘Teachers are natural researchers in the sense that all teaching is based on inquiry and the response of pupils provides ready evidence as to the effectiveness of various teaching and learning approaches’* (1999:42). Teacher research is not new (Elliott 1991; Stenhouse 1975) as teachers have been involved in curriculum development- type activities alongside experienced researchers for many years. However, the newer concept of the teacher researcher emphasises the agency of teachers in initiating and leading their own research and such research is considered emancipatory (Carr and Kemmis 1986). Sometimes, teachers are drawn to Masters courses as a means to engage with research and to deepen their knowledge, interrogate it and to challenge assumptions they make about their practice. It is incumbent on teachers as part of their professional practice to reflect critically on their practice in order to ensure the best possible learning conditions and outcomes for pupils. Whilst teaching experience provides a rich frame of reference of ‘what has worked’, teacher research provides a platform for professional development that can lead to changed, better, different practices that challenge the status quo. Many teachers settle into comfortable routines and mental habits and can benefit from the opportunity to reflect critically on these. A desire to research often springs from a sense of dissatisfaction, a felt need, a self-questioning, as Cochran-smith and Lytle put it: *‘Teachers’ questions often emerge from discrepancies between what is intended and what occurs’* (1993:14). Put simply, even experienced teachers will be aware that sometimes the old tried and tested ‘does not work’ in some contexts. A very natural response is to seek to understand this phenomenon in which case, as Cochran- Smith and Lytle suggest: *‘Teacher research stems from or generates questions and reflects teachers’ desires to make sense of their experience-to adapt a learning stance or openness toward classroom life’* (ibid: 25).

What I am interested to explore in this article is the experiences of language teachers who have developed their professional identity of ‘teacher researcher’ to make sense of their classroom life and the dynamics and discrepancies therein. The teachers who are the focus of this article have undertaken classroom research in the light of their own questions that arose from their classroom realities. To summarise how research is being understood in this context:

- The definition of research is of ‘systematic self-critical inquiry’ (Stenhouse 1981:103)
- Such research is done **by** teachers, often **with** other teachers, **not on** teachers
- The research is driven by personal interest and a felt need.

In the cases of the four teacher researchers featuring in this article, I show how they have been motivated to research their practice and been transformed by it. Their research was undertaken as part of Masters’ level study that ensured structure, rigour and validity in the teachers’ research. The teachers’ research was concurrent with their roles as full time classroom teachers. As such, the teachers came to inhabit a hybrid persona of teacher researcher, looking both inwards and outwards to reflect critically on their practice (Kincheloe 2003).

## 2. Teacher research as critically reflective practice

The shift from the common perception of the teacher as reflective practitioner (Schön 1987) to the construction of the teacher researcher persona seems to me a question of a changed teacher mind set, from a largely reactive evaluation of practice to a critical interrogation and re-evaluation of personal pedagogical spaces. Larrivee (2000:294) suggests that critical reflexivity is the distinguishing feature of reflective practitioners and that it is this that gives teachers '*the necessary sense of self-efficacy to create personal solutions to problems*'. Teachers already inhabit a natural research habitus and are surrounded by and work constantly with data, thus making them '*ipso facto researchers into their own practice*' (Bryant, 1996:115). One problem is that teachers are often wary of what they perceive as research and do not see themselves as part of research activity. Arguing for a more proactive stance on the part of teachers, rather than passively reacting to or negating the value of research, Burke and Kirton (2006:1) locate teachers undertaking small scale research '*at the centre of knowledge production in the professional context of the classroom*', arguing that reflexivity '*helps to illuminate their own positions in educational processes*'. These, I suggest, are positions that the teachers may want to change. Adults enjoy learning in solitary fashion according to Huberman (2001), although they need the time and space to do so. However, when teachers become involved in a more participatory, collaborative kind of reflection, involving colleagues as co-researchers, listening to the student voice and engaging with outside contacts such as academics, teacher trainers or critical friends, the results can be very powerful. This kind of collaboration can create a strong voice in urging change and innovation and in influencing educational policy-making and implementation in a 'bottom-up' activist way. As such, teacher researchers can legitimately question existing agendas and begin to set their own according to Pring (2000).

## 3. A conceptual framing of the development of teacher researchers

A crucial consideration in this article is the impact of the research on each teacher in terms of potential transformation. For this purpose, I refer to Kennedy (2005) who has proposed a scale that classifies organised activities in formal learning contexts and which in the case of these teachers, is a Masters' course. At the lowest level on the scale is the **transmissive** level, where teachers receive information from tutors, mentors (experienced teachers guiding newer teachers), peers and self-study. The next level is the **translational** level where teachers try out ideas and activities in their classrooms and begin to become aware of strategies that work and that support learning as well as the constraints. At the **transformational** level, teachers undertake reflection and start to analyse and evaluate their practice with a view to understanding and resolving tensions. Kennedy's levels are helpful in reflecting on each of the teacher's point of arrival as teacher researchers. All four teachers had had substantial transmission of knowledge, both during and prior to the Masters. The four teachers had varying experiences at the transactional level and were all experienced practitioners, albeit at different stages of their career. The opportunity for structured research with a Masters with training in research methodologies and skills, gave a platform for potentially transformational activity. It is evidence of the transformational process that provides a framework for my analysis and reflections on the research carried out by the four teachers discussed in the next section.

#### 4. The context of the teacher researchers

The four teachers whose research is presented, two from England and two from Spain, have several features in common. The teachers are all committed teachers of languages in primary and /or secondary schools. The Spanish are teachers of English as a foreign language, and the teachers in England are teachers of Spanish as a foreign language. Their contexts of teaching are, of course, different although there are important commonalities. The Universities where the Masters courses are run, for example, are both well- established institutions with strong traditions in the fields of Modern Foreign Languages Education. All four teachers were taking a Masters course in their respective Universities that focused on aspects of classroom language teaching, learning and assessment. The teachers took several taught modules that explored theoretical concerns and sought to link these to practice. They also had to engage in some small- scale school-based research. In both cases, the teachers did a small piece of research for a research-based module assessment then a larger piece of action research as a final assignment. The teachers were all required to undertake school-based teacher research in school and arrived at a similar end point through a slightly different contextual route in their Masters' study.

The teachers have been chosen as 'telling cases' (Mitchell 1984:239) to provide insights when the teachers 'tell' of their understanding and interpretation of their chosen research topic as they researched, reflected upon and theorised their research in their particular classroom contexts. They did their 'telling' in research diaries, in oral and email discussions about their research and, finally, in detailed accounts of their research in their final scholarly- written assignments. The teachers were supported throughout the research to help them design their research and carry it out competently and ethically. They were also tutored in how to collect and analyse data. Their challenge was to observe, reflect and evaluate with a critical eye to: *'stand back and examine the underlying beliefs and values which are informing decision-making and actions in classroom situations'* (Wilson 2009:17)

For each case, drawing on the teachers' accounts using their own words, I provide a context, the research questions, the purpose of the research, a description of the methods, the outcomes of the research and an insight into the teacher's critical reflexivity. I also highlight impact on practice and the potential sustainability of such change. I do this by showing evidence of their reflexivity in term of their questions, their decisions and the concerns they raised. I end by showing how the teachers empowered themselves through their research.

##### Telling Case 1: James

###### ***Tell me who you are and what you do***

*'I work in a mixed private school in England with an intake of children aged 3 -13, and teach French and Spanish. For the research, I worked with pupils aged 10 to 13. I have been teaching for 16 years. I am Head of Department, responsible for the languages provision in my school'.*

###### ***What did you want to research and why?***

*'I think that there is a lot of confusion regarding what can be achieved in a modern foreign languages classroom in a school hence the importance of self-directed learning strategies. I was interested to explore how Assessment for Learning [‘the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and teachers to decide where they need to go, and how best to get there’ Mansell et al., 2009:10] might promote better pupil self-regulation. One 9 year old pupil commented: ‘I’m not very good at trying*

*other things. I tried it once and flunked [failed] the test. So I stick to the normal way'. I found this rather limiting.*

*So, I designed the following research questions:*

- *Whether the use of learning strategies leads to a higher level of self-regulation and therefore increased positive learning experiences*
- *How feedback helps pupils adopt these learning strategies and therefore gain automaticity in their use of the foreign language*

### ***How did you do the research and why in this way?***

*'I undertook an in-depth review of the current literature on AfL and self-regulation, which allowed me to reflect on the main issues which needed to be investigated. Following this, empirical data were collected through questionnaires, to ascertain pupil perceptions about their learning, three focus groups with between 8 and 10 pupils to explore issues arising from the questionnaire, the writing of learning journals by 10 and 11 year old pupils to see how they recorded their learning strategies, and two peer lesson observations where a colleague and I compared our teaching routines. I wanted this research to be of benefit to all concerned'.*

### ***What were the findings?***

*'I found signs of pupils becoming more self-regulated where there were clear goals, feedback, strategies and motivation. Pupils need more of these and feedback action plans. Children need to be rewarded for trying to learn independently. They also need time to be able to process feedback to create action plans. With reference to the earlier pupil comment, they need to be encouraged to try new experiences. Sometimes people need to be encouraged to try new experiences before they see the enjoyment in it for themselves. The same could be said for teacher research'.*

### ***What has changed as a result of the research?***

*'It has greatly influenced my teaching. I would say that I have made giving feedback an absolute priority as a department and also helping students to reflect on translating that into action thus leading to gaining greater rewards. Next half term I am reviewing the departmental reward policy to reflect the need for greater emphasis on independent learning. Also the knowledge vs skill question really has made me think about the type of learning strategies we teach. I am absolutely determined to help kids proceduralize their knowledge effectively through focusing on learning strategies. I would say that is the biggest paradigm shift'.*

## **Comment**

James set himself quite ambitious research questions all focused on the promotion of better pupil independent learning. It was his belief that formative assessment as embedded in AfL approaches to teaching are crucial. In line with the research findings in the field on AfL (Black and William, 1998), Jamie's findings concurred with these and the theoretical concepts that he had grappled with became more relevant in the classroom. The involvement of pupils in this research gave credibility to the research in terms of student voice regarding what works best for pupils. James was worried about the pupil dependency and lack of adventurousness in their learning. His modest contribution to knowledge is that feedback per se is not very useful; pupils need time to process it and make sense of it. James' own practice has been transformed as he has learnt to encourage and reward innovation and risk in learning. Pupils have thus been encouraged to go down a different learning route. James' position power has enabled him bring about a culture change and to prompt colleagues to examine their practice.

## Telling Case 2

### ***Tell me who you are and what you do***

*'I'm Tulsi and I teach Spanish and French in a boys' comprehensive school in north London. I have been for teaching 3 and a half years. I did two pieces of school-based research during my initial teacher training, one of which inspired the Masters' research-based dissertation'.*

### ***What did you want to research and why?***

*'I felt that, more often than not, generally in languages classrooms, teachers talk more than the pupils and that pupil- with -pupil talk is inadequate. My research had a particular focus on speaking skills with the aim of understanding how to achieve more spontaneous Target Language (TL) from pupils during language lessons. It pays attention to the literature on skills, strategies, use of TL and self-regulation with regard to what occurs in a fairly typical secondary school language classroom. The research question was: how can speaking skills, especially pupil to pupil, be encouraged with Year 8 Classes (aged 12-13)'*

### ***How did you do the research and why in this way?***

*'I wanted to involve my colleagues in this research and wanted also to hear and give value to the pupil voice. I observed lessons of my colleagues then I interviewed them. I also organised a focus group of eight students who were openly invited to give their opinions and ideas on their learnings with a particular emphasis on speaking skills. The approach was thus entirely qualitative and designed to explore and gain insights into the way speaking skills were developed and valued in the classroom'.*

### ***What were the findings?***

*'From the data it was found that there were effective strategies being used within the language classroom and a considerable amount of TL used in the case of the teachers. However, the observations indicated that there is not quite enough on the part of the students. Even when asking for a translation or how to say a particular word in Spanish, they are asking one another in English:*

*Pupil A: Hey how do you say eleven again?*

*Pupil B: Once*

*Pupil A: Thanks, I forgot*

*Change would be beneficial within these particular classrooms. Such change would involve the creation of more opportunities for TL to occur not only between teacher and student but amongst students themselves. In addition, a narrow focus on attainment rather than the learning of a language in a communicative way is seen as a hindrance to more spontaneous speaking. Even small changes with regards to the promotion of and exposure to speaking skills such as encouraging more spontaneous answers to questions rather than set ready answers which have been memorised and more collaborative pupil working have the potential to give speaking skills more of a central role in the languages classroom'.*

### ***What has changed as a result of the research?***

*'The changes I have made to my teaching since my research are noticeable. I have adopted the 'TL lifestyle' (using the TL by default cf. Christie, 2013) with many of my groups encouraging them to join in and feel immersed in language learning. My colleagues have also put this practice into place and have seen already, in the first half of this term, some positive outcomes. With the adopted changes, the students in my school are slowly but surely finding the increased use of TL by not only the teacher but themselves, a normal habit during the lessons'.*

## **Comment**

In her first research-focused assignment, Tulsi argued that using the target language was time-consuming, not always justifiable and ineffective. However, that first research sowed seeds of doubt as she saw that pupils did not actually talk to each other enough in the TL. As a result, she revisited the topic on a bigger scale, reflected more deeply in the light of a wider range of data and completely changed her views from initially scepticism to the adoption of a new 'lifestyle' in the classroom. Tulsi invited colleagues to be involved in co-researching and she listened attentively to pupils who influenced her thinking. She has

transformed her mind set and practice and, using the power of her data and her personal influence, is beginning to have an impact on practice beyond her own classroom and in colleagues' classrooms.

### **Telling Case 3**

#### ***Tell me who you are and what you do***

*'Rut, and I have been teaching English in a secondary school for 6 years. I did my research in my 4<sup>th</sup> year of teaching with adult learners from age 17 to 67 in an adults' school'.*

#### ***What did you want to research and why?***

*'I wanted to try to measure the motivational influence of the use of different materials in the ESL classroom. Overall, the focus of this study was to ascertain insights into how intrinsic motivation can be modified by the use of varied materials. There is a big difference between those students who choose to learn English, and those for whom English is a compulsory curriculum subject. The big challenge for every ESL teacher is to enhance our students' desire to learn English'.*

#### ***How did you do the research and why in this way?***

*'In order to develop this study, these questions were posed:*

- 1: Does the use of entertaining materials encourage our students to take an active part in the classroom?*
- 2: How does the use of different materials improve students' self-confidence and students' desire for learning?*

*An extensive reading on language learning motivation theories was carried out at the beginning of the research, and a review of research in the field of materials and motivation. A wide range of materials were introduced in two completely different ESL classrooms within an adults' school. These teaching materials were examined through a deep observation process, questionnaires and interviews. I developed my research observing two different groups. The secondary education for adults class had 20 students aged 17 to 34, with varied motivation and effort. The second group was an unaccredited studies class with 24 students aged 33 to 67. They were learning English for the pleasure of learning, with no end certificate.*

*I paid special attention to creating materials which made learning stimulating and enjoyable, presenting tasks in a motivating way protecting the learners' self-esteem and increasing their self-confidence allowing learners to maintain a positive social image, promoting cooperation among learners and creating learners' autonomy by means of learner-centred activities. Two questionnaires were given out. The first one, "Assessing my teacher performance" was introduced to my students in November and a second one in January on learning strategies and materials. A one-to-one interview was done with five students from each group according to different profiles. I also kept a research diary'.*

#### ***What were your findings?***

*'In the 1<sup>st</sup> questionnaire, they said that I speak too much. I used to try to explain everything in depth, giving examples and asking for queries. Now, I try to speak less, make shorter overall explanations – which grab my students' attention – and focus more on personal questions and misunderstandings.*

*I found that when we are working in groups, the students like speaking in English, they see how grammar can be used in context, or it suddenly makes sense to them, and their creativity arises and their imagination is able to fly. I was also amazed about how competitive games and contests bring my students into the class, even the most demotivated ones'.*

#### ***What has changed as a result of the research?***

*'I speak less! I can also state that students take a more active part in the classroom if they are given entertaining materials. Dynamic and varied classes raise students' desire for learning, or at least, for attending the lesson. I always hear the question "what are we gonna do today?" which means they are expecting something different. Games and pair work seems to be the key elements of my teaching practice.*

*It was definitely one of the best modules from the Masters and I really learnt a lot about myself as a teacher and as a learner, since that was my first research and large piece of academic writing, which has been very useful afterwards. I am always analysing my teaching practice, and I am still worried about students' motivation so, I am still working on the same lines and offering different activities to motivate*



*them. Unfortunately, what concerns me the most is that students do not study at home, and I am afraid it is not a matter of motivation, but of responsibility and personal maturity but it is my task to go beyond that and keep on working hard’.*

## **Comment**

With her chosen aim of exploring motivational materials, Rut’s research context enabled her to compare two different groups where it was evident that some learners were more motivated than others. Her findings showed that there were issues common to both groups, namely their need for active learning and variety. Rut’s reflections show evidence of personal learning as a teacher- researcher- learner. As a teacher of many years of experience, she has transformed her teaching, providing engaging materials and activities and ensuring variety. In direct response to student feedback and acknowledging their views, she talks less and allows the students more space to talk, having empowered herself to trust students more. Interestingly, Rut does not see the research project as having reached an entirely satisfactory conclusion. Instead, the initial concern remains but she feels empowered to confront ongoing student needs and to give the students a voice about meeting their needs.

## **Telling Case 4**

### ***Tell me who you are and what you do***

*‘I am Maricruz, and I have been a primary teacher for 4 years, teaching Spanish, Science and Maths as well as English. My school is a state primary school in a city in Spain with a high level of children with special educational needs’.*

### ***What did you want to research and why?***

*‘When introducing oral activities in class, we must know how to teach speaking in class and we have to be aware of the different strategies that can be used to encourage students to speak in a foreign language. I was doubtful about which activities I should include and how I could implement them in class. I felt that also I did not use these activities to gather data useful for their assessment. This led to my research question: How can I improve the way I prepare oral and open-ended activities?’*

### ***How did you do the research and why in this way?***

*‘This research was carried out in a Year 1 Primary class with six-year-old pupils. They are highly motivated students, always eager to learn, like using English and they help the teacher in her development of the lesson. They have very few opportunities to use English outside the school, but they make the most of the time in the two lessons per week in the school. A trainee teacher acted as my “critical friend”. He remarked that when I prepared teacher-fronted materials, the students tended to get bored and that in activities in which only one of two pupils participated, the others got distracted and did not pay attention.*

*In the literature review, I was deep in thought with all the notions surrounding the implementation of oral activities in the classroom, their place in the Communicative Approach, and the kind of activities and its assessment. I devoted some time to analyse my teaching style and I realised that the way I learn is reflected in the way I teach. I am a visual learner so my lessons are full of visual stimuli and colours when writing on the board; This reflection was a turning point since I discovered that I needed to include more movement and audio materials in the lessons to cope with kinaesthetic and auditory learners. I kept a research journal with comments by my pupils, and transcripts of their performance’.*

### ***What were your findings and reflections on the findings?***

*‘With only one day of observation, I realised how deep I could reach in the direction of getting insights into what is going on in the class. I saw how pupils were reluctant to participate because they were unsure about the language and pronunciation, but also because they did not understand the dynamic of the activity. I discovered that written prompts were really useful and gave motivation to my students and it is much better going step by step and creating activities focused on one structure and then, combining it with prior knowledge. I found out that open-ended activities were incredibly useful because the learners*

*can add personal information as we do in real life but I did not know how to fully integrate them in my classes. The second discovery points to learning to make the most of the time. Instead of wandering around the class, I moved from one pupil to another with a purpose (correcting and helping them, checking their progress, taking notes for evaluation...) moving to the next task, since I had evidence of what my learners had been doing’.*

### **What has changed as a result of the research?**

*‘In order to improve oral and open-ended activities in class, I detail the steps that the activity involves and give clearer explanations to make my students feel more secure in class. I have also learnt to guess their needs as nowadays, I provide them with more practice of the linguistic structures before asking them to work in pairs or small groups and know that choral repetition, written prompts and rehearsal are crucial for them. My vision of time and assessment has wholly changed since they were sort of obstacles for me and now they are two factors to consider under my control and that permit me to establish a specific duration for the activities and to check my pupils’ progress for their assessment.*

*At a personal level, I feel that I have advanced a long way in the teaching of English, reassuring myself in the direction that everything done in class has a theoretical backup in which I can also find answers to my doubts or problems. Secondly, this has been a great reflective experience. It has forced me to reflect upon what had happened in class and not to just falling into routine and pre-established techniques for teaching. Action research has contributed to my professional development in the sense that I had never heard that teachers could also be researchers and that this experience was going to be so fruitful and rewarding. Researching my teaching allows me to look for solutions to problems, I do things because I believe in them and if something doesn’t work, I feel competent to find a solution and new ways of teaching’.*

### **Comment**

The challenge Mariacruz set for herself strikes at the very heart of current language teaching orthodoxy, the demands of communicative teaching approaches. Dissatisfied, she felt a desire to move away from her regular classroom practices and mere ‘checking of pupils’ books’ to reflect more deeply on her teaching with a view to improving oral activities in particular. In an interesting reversal of roles, a trainee teacher acting as ‘critical friend’ in her classroom, noted how pupils switched off when they were not actively engaged. Her research enabled to find reasons for the disengagement i.e. the children needed more graded support. Her findings led to a substantial change in her teaching style, focusing more on the learners’ needs. She also completely transformed her assessment practice towards a purposeful engagement with children (rather than the usual teacher’s wandering around), using and giving feedback to support practical progress. Framing her work with substantial reading around the topics, Mariacruz developed the confidence and assumed the power to make decisions about trying out alternative practices.

### **Overview: teacher self-agency and transformative professionalism**

There are several overarching themes emerging from the teachers’ ‘tellings’ about their research. First, research, so often eschewed by teachers as not relevant to them (*‘unimaginable for me’* as one teacher said), has, in these cases, enabled the teachers to observe, frame, re-frame, challenge, debate, hear alternatives, problematize and theory-make. This has resulted in, as Wajnryb (1992:8-9) writes: *‘the bottom-up recognition of theory emanating from practice [as] a means of forging personally meaningful links between theoretical knowledge about teaching and experience of the classroom’*. The teachers have fully embraced the theoretical dimensions of their research as well as implementing practitioner research.

Second, there is a sense of great personal achievement in what was clearly a challenging assignment. The amount of time needed for the resourcing, planning, implementation and analysis of the research was

considerable. The rewards, however, have also proved to be considerable, first, in terms of the depth of learning –Mariacruz used an image of ‘*diving into a thinking pool*’- and, second, in terms of a new found confidence: ‘*As a consequence, I have seen myself with enough courage to face challenges and difficult situations instead of looking at another direction and continuing with the same mistakes and weak points*’. It is this confidence that underpinned the teachers’ self- agency to make bold decisions in seeking solutions for problems in context. This reflects Gardner’s definition (2010:134) of self-agency as: ‘... *unambiguous; the teachers themselves derive the impetus for change from their own professional reading, reflection and collegial interaction*’.

Finally, the teacher researchers were encouraged to listen to student views (for this is not automatic on the part of teachers), with sometimes surprising results. The teachers, in hearing and acknowledging the student voice, have acted as ‘professional activists’ to create a better deal for the learners in developing a more inclusive and participatory pedagogy (Sachs 2003). Indeed, the learners have in all cases been given a more active role in their learning and a measure of self-agency. Emphasising the value of the student voice, Flutter and Rudduck (2004:7) write that: ‘*Pupils of all ages can show a remarkable capacity to discuss their learning in a considered and insightful way....There is also evidence to suggest that it may also have a beneficial effect on pupils’ performance*’. Ultimately, the learners’ interest was at the heart of and generated these researches that show powerful evidence of transformative professionalism.

## 5. Conclusion

The small scale research undertaken and enjoyed by teachers themselves discussed in this article testify to the power of such small scale investigations and to the developing agency of such teachers. As the sample is drawn entirely from Masters’ cohorts of students, motivation was very high and the teachers had training, time and support for their endeavours. Although these teachers undertook their research principally for themselves, they involved colleagues and the pupils, sometimes the head teacher and parents in a much more collaborative activity enabling more sustainable practice. Sustainability requires creative, reflexive and participative learning processes such as those described.

Teachers like talking about their work and doing research creates a shift from what Hopkins and Lagerweij refer to as the ‘anecdotal evidence and perceptual data collected unsystematically’ (1996:88) to the posing of important questions that can seed a more systematic type of teacher research of wider educational value. As Burke and Kirton write: ‘*The significance of insider research should not be underestimated. Methodologies that support knowledge production from an insider perspective and at the localised level are of great value in developing more nuanced and complex understandings of educational experiences, identities, processes, practices and relations*’ (2000:2). Such activity, I would suggest, with time, resources and support, is replicable and could be structured into the daily business of schools within their Professional Development framework and become a driving force for school improvement. In this way, the small scale activity of one teacher could have considerable impact on the whole school, some way beyond the original intentions. A whole school embracing of more personalised teacher research would also enable the outcomes of teacher research to be disseminated more widely and the learning shared.

The teachers found doing study and research on top of their normal jobs something of a challenge, but also personally enriching and a recognisable if modest contribution to enhancing learning in their schools. Such enhancement is only sustainable when it is believed in and actioned by teachers in their classrooms, as echoed in the cases of these teachers in their accounts of their research and transformation of their practices. Ultimately, the teachers have re-framed their practice more in alignment with their values and beliefs in the context of their use (McNiffe and Whitehead 2000; Eraut 1994). As such, the research was not just a ‘one-off’ experience for these teachers but the continuing development and reshaping of their professional identity and practice.

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